MMR 355

By Bob Charles
NMRA President

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it

Many years ago I was searching for a prototype that interested me sufficiently to model it. My general interests have followed the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Chesapeake and Ohio—and I have always had a healthy interest in narrow gauge logging. I suspect the latter is a result of the "Narrow Gauge Mafia," a loosely knit group who often displayed their very substantial skills at MER regional conventions. Their "Mafia Room" was dedicated to narrow gauge and the folks who spent time there with their modules and displays were very vocal in promoting both eastern and Colorado prototypes.

While that group has struck off on its own, operating today as the Mid-Atlantic Narrow Gauge Guild, the interest has stuck. I attend their meets when I can, but really wish they still attended MER events so more modelers could be "bitten by the narrow-gauge bug."

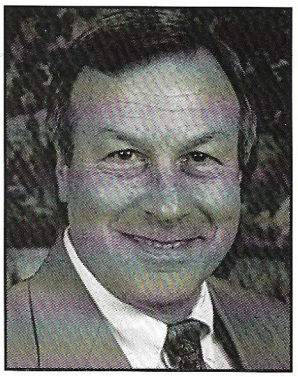
Searching for a scheme that would incorporate all of these broad interests, I hit upon the concept of the South Penn Railroad. The South Penn was a line projected by William Vanderbilt and his New York Central across Pennsylvania, connecting the Reading in Harrisburg with the Wabash in Pittsburgh to compete with the Pennsylvania. I learned much more about it in a small monograph, *Vanderbilt's Folly,* and in Burgess & Kennedy's *Centennial History of the Pennsylvania Railroad.* It seems that in the early 1880s the New York Central actually procured the right of way, graded, dug tunnels and was ready to lay track on a lower-grade route than the Pennsylvania across the state. Their motivation was an undeclared "war" with the PRR, which was then invading Central territory with construction of a line up the west shore of the Hudson.

J. Pierpont Morgan, financier for much of American business through his bank, decided it was a terrible waste of resource for a new railroad to conquer the Alleghenies for the sake of competition. It would drive down profitability for both roads. Morgan contacted William Vanderbilt of the Central and invited him for a Saturday sail on his yacht, the Corsair. Unbeknown to Vanderbilt, he had made the same invitation to George Roberts, President of the PRR. Both came aboard, were shown to their cabins, and the yacht set sail. Imagine the surprise when Morgan brought them into the salon and announced that the ship would not dock until agreement was reached between them to end this wasteful competition. The long and the short of it is that the PRR turned over the West Shore Line to the New York Central and the Central abandoned the South Penn. Just that simple!

The South Penn right-of-way lay dormant and eroding for the next 51 years. In 1935, the state of Pennsylvania approached the Works Progress Administration with the idea of creating an "All Weather Highway" across the state. With backing all the way to President Roosevelt, funding for the WPA grant was approved and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission created.

The old South Penn roadbed that never saw a train finally operated as a highway. The Turnpike opened in 1940, four lanes right across the southern tier of the state—the first of its kind in the nation.

Now, you may ask what possible prototype this could create for a model railroad. Well, with some minor revision of history, I think it the perfect prototype. What if the PRR had insisted on a completed railroad before it would turn over its West Shore Line? After all, it was turning over to the Central a line that operates to this day. Couldn't the PRR use an alternative, lower grade line to more cheaply haul their freight, thus speeding passenger traffic? What if the Central had agreed? What would the impact on the areas now served have been? The more I thought about it, the more modeling sense it made. The clincher was the thought that PRR purists could never say something "wasn't prototypical." After all, who can say what tricks the Central may have played in construction?



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Well then, obviously Morgan, Roberts and Vanderbilt must have agreed to allow completion of this new route. Their logic must have been that with devastating competition avoided, the investment would be able to stand on its own and thus a good idea. With this agreement worked out, all aboard the Corsair returned harmoniously to the New York waterfront. The new road across Pennsylvania was rapidly pushed to completion per the agreements and both routes were turned over to their proud new owners. Anyhow, this is the version of history I prefer to support.

Armed with this "legend," I began enthusiastically dreaming about the new railroad that would emerge in our basement. You know it is quite challenging to fit the entire state of Pennsylvania into a basement that approximates 26 x 26 feet and still have space for a workshop. Selective compression was definitely in order.

After 10 years or more of construction, the basement is filled with the creation of the South Penn as it might have been. The layout features some 150 scratchbuilt turnouts, predominantly hand-laid trackwork, laminated lattice roadbed, and full cabinetry under the layout to provide storage space. While operations are not yet in full swing, a new DCC system is about to be installed on the standard gauge. Track will run from Philadelphia (an off-scene staging yard) to Pittsburgh and Wheeling (off-scene staging paralleling Philly). Tributary lines and interchanges include a standard-gauge shay-powered coal line, the Indian Creek Valley Coal Company, interchanging in Westmoreland County; a narrow gauge logging operation, the Shober's Run Lumber Company, meeting the South Penn Division in Bedford; and an interchange point with the C & O at Somerset. What's that you say? The C & O never reached Somerset? Oh, but under the revisionist theory of history they were compelled to do so as Somerset grew so much they had to provide service. Besides, it made an easy outlet to ship their coal competitively to the Northeast by transferring to the Pennsy there. (That's my story, and I'm sticking to it!)

The railroad is probably larger than I would attempt if I knew when I started what I know now but, then, that's the beauty of a lifetime project. It has to run on no particular schedule. Now, if I can just complete enough scenery to achieve that final certificate for MMR.

If you are interested in learning more about the history of the real events described here, you may want to contact the Kalmbach Memorial Library. They may even have a copy of Burgess & Kennedy's Centennial History for sale. If not, maybe they can point you in the right direction. It is a fascinating story.